

Accessibility: A Business Owner's Perspective

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Accessibility...What do you think of when you hear this word?

Wikipedia says it is the degree to which a product, device, service or environment is available to as many people as possible. For many of us, the ability to access is a given. It is something that is taken for granted. We open a door, we shop and compare prices, we buy what we want, and then open the door again to leave.

In Ontario, 1.7 million people identify as having a disability. Locally, this translates to approximately \$165 million in spending power, which grows to \$1.3 billion of disposable income when you factor the friends and family of persons with a disability. If your business looks at people with a disability as a niche market, then it is time to re-evaluate who your target market really is.

- Our businesses must take an active role in providing an increasingly accessible environment that more people can freely enjoy.
- Sarnia's median age is **four years** older than the nation's population, and that currently 1 in 7 people in Ontario have a disability. With these numbers rising, we know that eliminating barriers for our guests and creating a more accessible environment will have a tremendous return.
- Understanding that customers with disabilities are a growing market, we strive to serve all potential customers and their families and friends, whether they are living in the community or visiting our awesome Huron shores, parks, entertainment and business core.

- Without doubt, we know that we must continue to listen to our guests, and strive to meet all of their needs. We know that we are not *fully* there, but remain dedicated to moving forward with our goal.
- By remaining open and eager, to provide tools and accommodations to job candidates with a disability, self-declared, disclosed or not, we will not limit ourselves from recruiting the best possible candidates for the job positions we seek. This practice has proven beneficial to our bottom line...and we know that following the same principle, and being as accommodating and welcoming to all community members and visitors, will no doubt have a tremendous positive impact to *our sales growth*.
- There are simple solutions to breaking barriers. Most can be achieved at minimal costs to business owners who wish to capture a larger growing market that otherwise could be lost to them:
 - ✓ *Training* — All team members must be trained to assist guests with individual needs, such as allowing all service/guide animals into your facilities, and also to navigate menu boards, ask questions, and read out change. Treating all guests with Dignity, Consideration and Patience.
 - ✓ Our training titles include, “How May I Help You?” to provide an understanding of guests with a disability, and also “Understanding Diversity” to foster a more welcoming and accepting work environment for team members and guests alike.
 - ✓ Initially, we learned from our guests and team that the design of our tables created a barrier. The pedestal legs, which flowed

outward to the corners, blocked the ease of chairs moving in and out. With a power drill, a rechargeable battery, and *about....* four hours...we were able to add accessibility with a quarter turn of each pedestal affixed to the tabletops.

- ✓ Last winter's endless snowfall taught us to ensure that snow removal contracts, along with team members, must ensure the clearing of city sidewalks in front of our business so everyone can get there.
- ✓ Recently, we increased Accessible parking spaces at our downtown location. We know from guest responses that this will benefit our other locations as well.
- ✓ By adding a bicycle rack in an area away from the building, it helped to keep the sidewalk area around the entrance free and clear.

These are some simple, low cost solutions to breaking barriers in our business.

- People who face barriers that limit their consumer choices, in addition to their families and friends, currently make up about 53% of the market place. As our baby boomers get older, that percentile is going to rise.
- Business owners cannot afford to turn away from even a small slice of a \$40 billion market.
- Most accommodations are relatively low cost.
- By collectively pooling resources, information, best practices and purchasing power, we can even further reduce costs and simplify our end game.

- If we continue to Break Down Barriers within our businesses, one by one, and keep this as our goal, we will have a definite advantage.
- Inspired by our Mayor's challenge to increase accessibility in our community, we have developed a program to do just that.
- Breaking Barriers to Business: Accessibility Sarnia-Lambton was developed to equip businesses and agencies with the tools and resources they need to meet their requirements with Ontario's accessibility legislation and to open their doors to all consumers.
- Upon request and appointment, a representative will complete a comprehensive checklist with a business owner or representative to help meet their legal requirements and then identify the accessibility strengths and weaknesses-at no cost.
- Based on the results of the Comprehensive Accessibility Checklist, we will work together to find out what's the right fit for each business.
- Again, it's a myth that accessibility accommodation is difficult and costly, and Breaking Barriers to Business is here to find the solutions that fit individual business needs.
- Workshops are held regularly to help businesses with such topics as: Accessibility Standards for Customer Service Training, Policy Writing and Grant Application, among other topics

- Breaking Barriers to Business will promote our local Accessible Businesses at no cost with an interactive map of Sarnia-Lambton and also identifiable window stickers, so that visitors as well as community members will more readily and easily find them.
- Creating a community in which every person who lives or visits can fully participate makes good sense for our people, our business, and our community. It is easy, its unique, its free, and it is something we are proud of.